

WRAP ME UP IN MY
AUBUSSON CARPET

BY

John Middleton Murry

Victoria R. J.

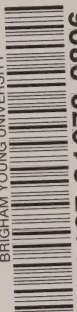
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HE Aubusson carpet belongs to Mr. George Moore. He has written about it in many books. Americans cross the ocean in order to set a reverential foot upon it. Mr. George Moore and the Aubusson carpet live together in Ebury Street, Pimlico.

Mr. George Moore is a writer of considerable ability, whose writings are caviare to the general. Mr. Moore accordingly makes a virtue of his necessity and issues them in sumptuous volumes at a price which no ordinary people can afford to pay. He hides his light under a two-guinea bushel, with the result that the majority of his "select tribunal" of a thousand readers do not buy his books to read at all; they buy in order to sell them at a profit.

But why should not Mr. Moore turn his books into bibelots? That is an affair between him and his conscience; it is also an affair between him and his courage. Perhaps he feels that his ships will float only on the delicate and sheltered pond he builds for them; they would founder in the surges of the open sea. And in truth, if this be his fear, it is not ungrounded. His ships are not built for the longest voyages; they will scarcely make a landfall in immortality. His books have not in them the stuff which abides; the life which is everlasting refuses to inhabit their tenuous and brittle tissues. "Nothing can please many and please long," said Dr. Johnson, "but just representations of human nature." And the power of representing human nature justly, the instinctive knowledge of the simple and mysterious truth of living men and women, was withheld from Mr. Moore at his birth. He was given many gifts, but this one was denied him. He was given the gifts of a good memory, of pleasing conversation, of a settled income, of great industry, and of colossal self-esteem;

he was given a fair allowance of wit and an overflowing measure of treachery. Nearly all that talent can do he has done; but the word that quickeneth, which genius alone may utter, he has never spoken. The *quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus* of human thought and emotion he has never expressed. He has polished his words until they shone: they have never caught fire. By this alone we know that Mr. Moore has not the creative gift. For the words of the true creator are burned away by the passion of his knowledge. What he has to tell triumphs over his telling. "He has no time to *write*."

"He has no time to *write*." Those are Mr. Moore's words, not mine. They show that Mr. Moore, who has no time for anything but *writing*, knows the condition of the creative writer well. No one, indeed, knows it better, for no one has more assiduously sought the secret, no one more bitterly failed to make it his own. To know so much—to be so little able; to see that clumsy Balzac pouring life upon the printed page in streams of inspissated verbiage, to

watch that "absurd" Hardy—that again is Mr. Moore's word, not mine—clothing his melodramatic skeletons with flesh and blood which lives and moves and has its being, and with a touch of his fingers filling his stories with the fragrance of the great earth itself, while Mr. Moore's smell chiefly of the midnight oil; to have talent enough to know what genius is and to have no genius—that is bitter indeed.

It is bitter, but surely Mr. Moore might have accepted it long ago. For he is old. When a writer is young it is perhaps necessary that he should not admit the existence of men greater than himself in his own time and his own language. He needs a preposterous and sublime self-confidence in order that his potentialities may be put to their full stretch. A touch of secret megalomania in his nonage may do a young man not harm but good, for it is not really a judgment on himself and his fellows, but a vindication of his own freedom to become—all that he can become. But when the period of hoyden growth is ended, then a writer's self-conceit

must disappear. If he is to take the mortal leap into a true maturity, he must see himself as he is and his fellows as they are. He must know the gifts he has and acknowledge his lack of the gifts denied him. He must, not merely with his lips but with his soul, confess the presence of greatness where he finds it.

This is a crucial discipline for the minor writer, for only by its means can he come into full possession of what is indefeasibly his own. Having passed through this discipline, he does not waste his strength on tasks he cannot accomplish; he knows what he can do and he sets himself to do it; and more than this, the inward acknowledgment of another's greatness purifies his own powers. He is no longer embittered and corrupted by the strain of competition, he is not on edge to outdo and defeat and denigrate his rivals. He has no rivals: he has beside him only other writers than himself, some greater, some smaller, but all alike in that each has the opportunity (if he will but pay the price for

taking it) of doing something of value that no other man can do.

Therefore there is a moment when it is no longer bitter but serenely sweet for talent to acknowledge genius. When a man knows within himself that he can face the truth, he knows also that he can afford to face it : he cannot be overwhelmed. I make no doubt that it cost Ben Jonson a hard struggle to confess that William Shakespeare was a better man than he ; but he did confess it, and when he found it in himself to write the noble poem for the First Folio he knew as by a certain sign that he also would not be forgotten. When Jonson had to declare himself, he knew what was required of him : when the summons came to him—and it was surely self-sought—to tell what he, a poet, knew of his fellow-poet, then Jonson spoke like a man before his God—indeed, at that moment he *was* before his God if ever man was. He put clean out of his mind all the little grudging thoughts he had nursed against Shakespeare, all the many pricks his vanity had suffered from Shake-

spere's smiling indifference to his theories, all the criticisms of Shakespeare's work which few could make better or with better right than he: at the moment when he had to speak of what he knew to a world which could distinguish then no more than it can distinguish now between greatness and success, all these petty memories were forgotten. The angel flew from the altar and set the coal of fire upon his tongue, so that he prophesied:—

Triumph, my Britain, thou hast one to show
To whom all scenes of Europe homage owe.
He was not for an age, but for all time! . . .
Nature herself was proud of his designs
And joyed to wear the dressing of his lines . . .
. . . Sweet Swan of Avon! What a sight it were
To see thee in our waters yet appear,
And make those flights upon the banks of
Thames

That so did take Eliza and our James.
But stay, I see thee in the hemisphere
Advanced and made a constellation there.
Shine forth, thou star of poets, and with rage
Or influence, chide or cheer the drooping age,
Which, since thy flight from hence, hath
mourned like night,
And despairs day but for thy volume's light.

The very gesture was an earnest of his own immortality.

Now let us make a small comparison. Mr. Hardy is not Shakespeare: Mr. Moore is not Jonson. But for the moment let us imagine that the proportion stands thus: Mr. Hardy is to Shakespeare as Mr. Moore is to Jonson. I think that not even Mr. Moore's admirers would cavil at the ratio: those who are not his admirers will be shocked by my generosity, and those who admire Jonson (as I admire Jonson) will be offended (as I am offended) by the parallel. But let it stand. After all, I use it chiefly to show how wildly wrong it is in one manifest essential. Mr. Hardy and Mr. Moore are also roughly contemporaries. And for some reason, which I shall try hereafter to make still more explicit, Mr. Moore in his latest volume, "Conversations in Ebury Street," feels himself called upon to prophesy concerning Mr. Hardy's work. Alas for him, no angel flew from the altar with a coal of fire to set on Mr. Moore's tongue. No doubt the angels

knew it was too black and bitter and spotted for their celestial cautery.

“I would think (says Mr. Moore) only of how Mr. Hardy may be saved from invidious familiarity when he advances to meet our God, for never having known him on earth he may, when he steps from Charon’s boat, ask the God to point out his (Mr. Hardy’s) seat to him ; or it may be that he will seek his seat himself, and not finding it next to Shakespeare or Aeschylus, he will return and complain to Apollo, who will ask : Who is this one ? A messenger will answer : This is Hardy, the writer of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*. And the author of these absurd works, the God will reply, would place himself next to Aeschylus and Shakespeare ! The messenger will answer : He has listened long to the quackers that beset the shallows of mortality. All the same, let him be hurled into the hollows we have reserved for—and the God will quote three names which I am not called upon to transcribe.

And again the very gesture is an earnest—of the complete and utter oblivion that will fall upon the works of Mr. George Moore.

Fool, fool that he is ! Why could he

not refrain? This senile indecency will be remembered against him for ever. He is young no longer,

The heyday in the blood is tame, it's humble
And waits upon the judgment,

and the act is frigidly disgusting. Can it be that Mr. Moore is avid of immortality at all costs, like the incendiary of Ephesus? Fool, fool that he is! Why could he not refrain?

In the interests of truth, comes the senile bleat. But, Mr. Moore, you know the truth about Mr. Hardy and yourself as well as I, better than I: you know that he is potent to create, and you are impotent. And I know that you know this by two certain signs: first, that you dare not criticise Mr. Hardy's work at all. You do not criticise his novels, you merely worry, like a yelping terrier, a page of his prose. You stand aloof from the entire point, and you know it just as well as you know that the smooth rhythms and grammatical correctness of every page of *Esther Waters* cannot lend that pale simulacrum of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

a scintilla of true vitality: it remains flat, stale and unprofitable like beer-spillings on the counters of the public-houses you have so sedulously and lifelessly described. The second sign is this: You have chosen for your attempt at destruction two passages of Mr. Hardy's prose which have a rare intrinsic beauty of their own. You spit on them, you throw little handfuls of mud at them, and call to your Achates to admire: "How dirty they are! How muddy!" But the dirt and the mud are of your own slinging. Mr. Hardy wrote: "The persistent torrent from the gargoyle's jaws directed all its vengeance into the grave." You say he should have written: "The pour of water from the gargoyle washed away the gravemound." How, in the name of Apollo, do you know? The truth is that Mr. Hardy would have written that flat, stale and unprofitable sentence only if he had been Mr. Moore!

Yet why should Mr. Moore thus expose himself? For this "criticism" of Mr. Hardy is not criticism at all; it is simply the

spluttering of venom. Mr. Moore is not a fool: even though his heart is black with envy, he need not have suffered his words to appear black with envy also. Even if he could not, by defect of his own soul, understand the character of Mr. Hardy's achievement, he could have held his peace, or he could have written a criticism in which his own rancour and hatred were concealed. But he could not refrain: the angry serpent stung him on until he whose chief occupation as a writer has been to uncover the nakedness of others has finally and forever uncovered his own.

Of course, Mr. Moore cannot really understand Mr. Hardy: he can understand, he can feel, that Mr. Hardy's is genius and his own is talent, and he is angry and venomous. But the essential nature of Mr. Hardy's genius is completely concealed from him, for "it is a law as unconditionally true as any one of Newton's laws of motion that sincerity cannot be penetrated by insincerity." Those are Mark Rutherford's words. Mark Rutherford was, like

Mr. Moore, a minor writer, but he was one who possessed an inward purity of purpose which will keep his works sweet when Mr. Moore's are rotten. Mark Rutherford could not lie; Mr. Moore cannot tell the truth. The lie festers in his soul, and a smell of corruption comes out of all his works. He prides himself on his taste; in book after book he proclaims the exquisiteness of his own sensibility: yet what makes those books Mr. Moore's own indefeasibly, the maker's mark by which they can never be mistaken, is the uniform and unvarying vulgarity with which they are conceived. Those who have nostrils sensitive to atmosphere find the odour of Mr. Moore's books intolerable. They infect the air. And this is the cause why of all men of letters of his age to-day Mr. Moore is the least respected. Those who recognize the talent are contemptuous of the man. Talent receives its quality from the soul of which it is the instrument. When the soul is corrupted, the talent is corrupted also, and it decays.

In vain, therefore, Mr. Moore invokes

the protection of Landor and Stevenson and Pater. These were not great writers, but they are in their degree immortal. Not one of them but had the nobility of soul and the steadfast sincerity of purpose which makes their labours heroic and their achievements heroic too. If they felt envy they conquered it; they overcame their baser impulses. Mr. Moore has sought notoriety by indulging his.

In this last book he has fittingly crowned the labours of his life. In his treatment of Mr. Hardy he has surpassed his own previous triumphs in envy and vulgarity. An evil fate drives him on to the utter perversion of his gifts. He cannot help himself; he is possessed—but possessed by such a mean, ugly, contemptible little demon that we can feel no pity for him.

No, we simply feel that it is time he ceased to trouble us. But since he is a writer we cannot let him go wholly unhonoured and unsung. Therefore against the day when the summons comes for him

also to enter Charon's boat, we have prepared a dirge for him to sing:

Wrap me up in my Aubusson carpet,
And say a poor buffer lies low . . .

But, alas, never so low before!





